Some Place in My Body

because you have become Aotearoa to me

Trisha Kehaulani Watson

I got on a plane.

I hated flying. I feared germs and heights, terrorists or random mechanical failures. I knew no one in Aotearoa. I didn't know where I was going (so much so that I didn't even realize Wellington was on the North Island of New Zealand until I opened the flight magazine).

I knew only that I had to go—that as a child, when asked if I had only one wish, I wrote neatly in my Hello Kitty journal: **"I WANT TO GO TO NEW ZELAND."**

So 20 years later, I got on a plane.

I hardly remember who I was I before I got on that plane. I remember being lost in familiar places. Noisy—inside and out. Momona, which wasn't mo' betta. I tried so hard to be here that I wasn't anywhere anymore. I tried so hard to do everything right that I did everything wrong.

I used to tell myself I was happy but I never actually felt happiness. Sometimes the enslaved are so much so as to never even know they are not free. Is this not the lesson of Plato's Cave? Freedom, friends, is relative; we learn it only by comparison and only in practice. For only those who truly know freedom can bring it to those still hunched beneath the weight of oppression. For a leader among slaves cannot truly be a leader if he himself is still a slave.

I sat in my hotel room that first day wondering if I had lost my mind. I left my son to fly to New Zealand to sit in a hotel room with nothing to do but watch *The Simpsons* and nothing to eat but Subway. I cried for an hour convinced that Pearl Harbor would surely be bombed again while I was away. As beautiful as New Zealand seemed from my hotel window, it could not calm my overwhelming sense of parental inadequacy. My Catholic upbringing kicked in—I was surely the world's worst mother.

But I now see that at that time I was not the mother my son deserved. And I now see every aboriginal child as my kuleana, my responsibility. For if those of us who have

been gifted by the gods with the capability to make life better for present and future generations do not fiercely seize our opportunities to do so, we fail all Native children—especially our own.

I aspire to nothing more in this life than to do my children proud. I dragged myself out to go to Te Papa Tongarewa (Museum of New Zealand). Wearing slippas, in the rain, I wandered through the freezing streets of Wellington. Only once inside Te Papa did I begin to notice how things were different in Aotearoa. Different for the Māori. Different because they have made it different. They have demanded it be different. Different because they understood that the colonizer will never freely give the oppressed anything. Justice for the subjugated will never come without war.

At the pōwhiri the next morning, we stood behind the kūpuna as we were welcomed outside Te Herenga Waka Marae at Victoria University. It reminded me of Kawainui Marsh, nestled in the mountains of Kailua on the island of O`ahu, only colder. Where the quiet is wet and heavy. Where the earth reaches up high above your head and makes you feel safe and small. The voices of the women that morning, calling out to us, calling out from among us, were strangely haunting—as if suspended in the air by the cold. As if welcoming not our bodies but our spirits. I remember them still.

I sat and listened to the men speak that morning, speaking only in Māori. I understood not one word, but understood them perfectly in my na`au (guts). That morning I fell in love with the ferocious life force of te reo Māori.

All around me were living, breathing Native voices; indigenous sounds. Unapologetic in their existence. Relentless in their command of our attention. And at that moment English became the most unnatural of sounds.

The `aumakua, the ancestral guardians of Hawai`i, had sent me knowing that I would be found. For in Aotearoa, where I thought I knew no one—I found I knew everyone—Cook Islanders, Samoans, Aboriginal Australians, Māori, and Native Americans. Every Native face reminded me of my own. Every story rang true. Every injury, every tale of discrimination, every wail of frustration resounded within me. My grief found a forum and comfort.

I am no longer alone in the world. Sometimes we need to go away to learn to come home.

Photo 1. The geothermal pools at Te Puia, Rotorua, New Zealand. *Photo by Trisha Kehaulani Watson.*

And the way home only appears when we are still. The `aumakua will only speak to us when we are quiet.

So now I go wherever the `aumakua send me. They have their reasons, and I have nothing to fear.

For we each have our path. We each have our place. And if we do not follow our path and do not stand strong in our place, we will not be who we are.

So in Aotearoa, where history is carved into wood and skin, I discovered that learning only begins when we have enough faith to be unafraid. For above all else, it is our fear that keeps us from freedom.

We cannot learn about the devastation of colonization through textbooks. One is only able to learn it in the faces of those who are colonized, occupied, enslaved. And only other Natives can teach us to be proud of who we are; the Natives of this life teach us how to listen to the Natives of lives passed; the Natives teach us how to fight for the

Natives of lives to come. That we are infinitely more than simply "the colonized," "the occupied," "the enslaved."

That we are glorious and beautiful beyond compare because we are Native.

It is only from other Natives than I can truly learn who I am. We are liberated by the ties that bind us to one another. Our shared histories. Our shared genealogies. Our shared colonial violences. Our shared struggles.

I learned much from Natives in Aotearoa.

I learned that beautiful women wear moko.

I learned that Hawaiians drink hard, but the Māori drink harder.

I learned that we feel some people before we see them.

I believe that what happened to me in Aotearoa was not learning, but remembering. Remembering things I have always known, some place in my body. Knowing things only I, a descendant of 40,000 generations of Hawaiians, can know. Native truths. Ancestral knowledges. Indigenous epistemologies.

More than anything—I learned I have much to learn.

I look forward to getting on many more planes.

Photo 2. The author and her son at the beach on the island of O`ahu, near Kalaeloa. *Photo by David Perreira.*

TRISHA KEHAULANI WATSON is from O`ahu. She is a lecturer in Hawaiian history at the University of Hawai`i, Mānoa, where she also works at the Kamakakūokalani Center for Hawaiian Studies. She is currently a post–Juris Doctor (JD) Fellow at the Center for Excellence in Native Hawaiian Law at the William S. Richardson School of Law. She received her JD degree in 2003 and is currently completing her PhD.